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How Right He Had It

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I began my professional life as a bilingual high school teacher in Boston before there was actually much formal “bilingual education” to be had. A small group of great teachers and a hundred willing students new to the United States, we made the best of our city, its people, and its places to help understand the world’s big ideas, and we had a great four-year run. The more the school district attempted to standardize the experience, however, the less engaging and productive it became, first for students and then for teachers. (What a harbinger for the “standards” movement, I realize now, with no small irony.) Frustrated, I moved on to teach Spanish and Latin American History in the “mainstream” program elsewhere in the same school, and to a year as a House Dean, all the while losing the energy and enthusiasm that had brought me into education in the first place. I had entered with a strong sense of wanting to give back to the people and the institution of school that had done a great deal for me, but as my experience and engagement with that institution grew, discomfort and malaise began to creep in.

Despite the best intentions, the interplay among curriculum, relationships, structures, time, communication, and expectations seldom supported the individual dreams and innate capabilities of young people. More often than not, I was unable to pinpoint or articulate exactly where and why things broke down, for me or for the students, believing as I did so strongly in the traditions of schooling. As my doubts and the roster of underperforming students grew, I began to plan for a career transition. I worked on my resume at night and began to scan the employment section on Sundays.

It was at that time that the opportunity to start an “alternative school” appeared. Against my better judgment, I grabbed at it, and this school became Boston’s Fenway High School, a long-time part of the CES network. Gratefully, and surprisingly, our first charge from the Superintendent and Director of Alternative Education was to spare no existing practice, value, or tradition of schooling in our mission to design a program that would work for struggling learners. Listening to these students and their explanations for why and how school didn’t work for them was critical to understand that the failure was not about the students.

Soon thereafter, I was presented with an early copy of Ted Sizer’s *Horace’s Compromise*. My connection to it was profound. Here was someone who wrote in a new and unique way about schooling, rooted in razor-sharp observations of the lives, hopes, and frustrations of real students and real teachers within their shared environment. The ethnographic accuracy, the understanding of the complicated ecology of the schoolhouse, and crystal-clear explanations of the dilemmas that had to me seemed troublesome but murky made for a new beginning and a recommitment to abandoning the many aspects of schooling that could at best result in a series of stand-offs and compromises. Above all, Sizer’s respect for the dignity of students, teachers, and the learning process came through loud and clear. His assertion of school re-invention as a moral imperative set the bar too high for the trivialities and disincentives of a mediocre education to be tolerated.

Soon after, Ted came to our school. Humble, low-key, yet thoughtful and earnest, he excited us about the business of re-inventing schools as no one else has before or since. That was 1988, within a few years of CES’s launch. The next decade offered a whirlwind of initiatives and conversations—the Citibank Faculty, the Thompson Fellows, the 50 Schools Project, Fall Forums bursting at the seams, *Horace’s School*, Re:Learning states, the ATLAS Project, Horace newsletters, and above all, the ever-growing group of incredible educators who gravitated toward and around Ted and the Common Principle, the exquisitely crafted, generative ideas that set our efforts in motion and sustained us. It had the feeling of a movement. Funders from both the philanthropic and corporate worlds paid attention and invested. His ideas and CES excitement seemed to be growing everywhere. Looking back, I realize how many thinkers and do-ers, many still at it today in 2009, got their inspiration, their jump-start, from those heady days, when it seemed that front-line educators could lead the reinvention of the public school system. Ted visited our school a number of times, always

modest, and tuned in to the kids and what they were saying and doing. Those were special and proud days. It sounds corny, but it had the feel to me of Gandhi passing through the village.

It seems in some ways a lifetime ago. Looking back, it seems that many people didn't fully understand that "Coalition ideas" would likely mean the demise of many of the trappings of school, or that lots of the folks that school often moved to the margins would likely remain nearer the center if the Common Principles were at the heart of the endeavor. A perceived loss of privilege within the meritocracy and the insatiable drive to standardize and measure have proven to be toxic constraints on the vision of the early 1990s.

I reread *Horace's Compromise* every summer, and every summer a certain chapter looms larger than the others, offering a freshness and insight that I may have missed before, or simply providing once again observations and insights that are every bit as cogent today as they were in 1984. This summer, it was the chapter called "Kids Differ." Last summer it was "Principal's Questions." The rereading takes me back and, at once, propels me forward.

It's hard to separate the man from the ideas, the enterprise from the principles, the memories from the dreams, and it's probably not worthwhile to make those distinctions. These days, when the policymakers and accountability experts have drained most of the joy and curiosity out of school, and seem content to expect better results from doing the same thing over again, it's easy to feel defeated. But one only need reread *Horace*, or watch the videos of Ted's Fall Forum keynotes, the 1993 Louisville opener, for example, to know how right he had it, and how his spirit and ideas have sustained two generations of educators, and will no doubt inform those to come.

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